

## Crack the whip on child marriages

Every year, nearly 1.5 million girls in the country are married before they turn 18. But social attitudes on child marriage appear to be changing, according to global data released by Unicef on Tuesday.

The prevalence of child marriage in India has dropped sharply from 47% in 2005-2006 to 27% in 2015-2016. The decadal decline in child marriage in the South Asia region has been sharp, says the Unicef study. India's improved record has been attributed to higher levels of education among women and the provision of cash transfers as incentives for girls not to drop out of school by many states.

But the enthusiasm about the improvement in national averages is dampened somewhat by very high rates of child marriage in certain states and districts. The highest rates of child marriage, up to 40%, are in Bihar, West Bengal and Rajasthan, while Tamil Nadu and Kerala have a prevalence of less than 20%.

According to Census 2011, six of the 10 worst districts were in Rajasthan, led by Bhilwara (55%) and Chittorgarh (54%). A 2017 study, commissioned by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, also said Rajasthan reported the highest incidence of child marriages followed by 15 other states that included Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Sikkim, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Activists say Rajasthan lags behind in prevention of child marriages. Festivals such as Akshaya Tritiya and Akkha Teej are considered auspicious to conduct child marriages in parts of rural Rajasthan. One big hurdle in the way of fighting this regressive practice is the absence of a provision to nullify child marriages. This means law enforcement agencies cannot take action to nullify such a marriage unless directed to do so by the person who was a child at the time of the marriage, and that, too, in a district court. Instances of underage brides coming forward to complain or seek annulment were rare.

Now, the Centre is proposing to amend the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, to make all future child marriages void ab initio (invalid from the outset). Such a deterrent could perhaps give greater meaning to schemes like Beti bachao, beti padhao.

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